

## **‘Characters... Stamped Upon the Mind’. On the A Priority of Character in the Caribbean Everyday**

‘Character’ was a key term in the early development of Anthropology as a discipline—Kant gives over the entire last section of his *Anthropology* to refining the idea of character as a ‘way of thinking’ ([1795]2006). However, perhaps inevitably its ideological career since then has been highly ambivalent. In the background of any contemporary theoretical intuition about how to use the word must be the famous ‘personality and culture’ studies of North American Boasian anthropology—the analyses of cultural character written in the 1930s and 1940s by Benedict, Mead, Kluckhohn, Fromm, Gorer and Bateson in the shadow of nationalism and war. Faubion has given an extensive survey of the questionable deployment of ‘character’ in this phase with an earlier intervention for this series of essays (see Faubion Special Edition details). ‘Character’ accumulated divergent meanings within American and European imperialism.<sup>i</sup> Certainly, it is noteworthy how the analytical focus in European social anthropology developed distinctly. Instead of emphasizing cultural character, social anthropology’s concern was with ‘social personhood’ (Carrithers et al. 1986). For social anthropologists from Rivers, Mauss and Radcliffe-Brown onwards, features that might otherwise be read as psychological traits were explored in terms of the institutionalization and expression of networks of roles and relations—especially those of kinship. WHR Rivers famous discovery was that by asking Torres Strait islanders to give him a list of their relatives he gained a scalable map of society. The kin terms the interviewee provided were a blueprint of the ‘duties’ and ‘rights’ that went into composing both their own moral personhood and that of others around them: ‘Oh Raga’, Banks Islander John Patutun told Rivers with disgust, ‘that is the

place where they marry their granddaughters' (1914:35). However, both in cultural and social schools of anthropology there were always complex equivocations between the structural and the biographic when it came to envisaging character and personhood via ethnographic reportage. Victor Turner's empathetic picturing of Muchona the Hornet offers a crucial example of the kind of free-play involved in writing about *both* the cultural typicality *and* psychological uniqueness of any given person (1967). Ultimately, Turner would come to argue forcibly against structural understandings of character and personhood that implied,

a systematic dehumanizing of the human subjects of study, regarding them as the bearers of an impersonal 'culture', or wax to be imprinted with 'cultural patterns', or as determined by social, cultural or social psychological 'forces', 'variables', or 'pressures' of various kinds (Turner 1979:60)

In his *Anthropology* Kant argues comparably that the character of the individual must not be mistaken for the character of the group, the sex, or the species--the kinds of willing and freedom involved are categorically different. To say that an individual 'has character' is to point to the maxims they have distinctly built for their own life, independently of other categories under which they may also fall—male, female, Spanish, German (Kant 2006:191-192). Yet, perhaps necessarily, the anthropology of the later Twentieth Century tended precisely to conflate these diverse meanings and types of character, foregrounding one at one time, another at another. Evans-Pritchard, for whom 'Nuer Character' is often synonymous with Nuer 'political structure' (e.g. 1940:50), nonetheless came to argue that anthropology had reduced the human to 'an automaton' significant only so far as their 'actions, ideas

and beliefs can be explained' and their lives 'planned and controlled' (1950:123).

The dominant theme in the study of character, then, as Turner notes, has been that of giving explanatory priority to the common discourses, shared habits, structured dispositions and mutually acknowledged systems of truth from which subjectivity is taken to be composed (cf. Murphy and Throop 2010). This commitment has nonetheless co-existed for many decades with periodic appeals to a 'gaze that consents to understand the subject as they are in their distinctive necessity' to use Chitralkha's apt recent phrasing (2017:168). Surely it is this 'distinctive necessity' that we recognise ontologically as someone's 'character', not the prefigured theoretical recipe that the anthropologist may offer simultaneously by way of context and explanation. And yet our capacity to perceive character at all already indicates imaginative selectivity, preemption or 'negative prehension' (Whitehead 1929). So, if 'character' reemerges now it does so in the presence of unresolved arguments and contradictory commitments—theoretical ghosts from Anthropology's past.

'Worlds', Nelson Goodman argues (as WHR Rivers does more narrowly for forms of kinship), 'differ in the relevant kinds comprised in them' (1975:63). When it comes to the anthropology of the Caribbean we can say that the 'distinctive necessity' that is individual character has loomed very large; *Dark Puritan* (Smith 1957, 1958, 1959), *Worker in the Cane* (Mintz 1960), *Oscar* (Wilson 1974), *Mama Lola* (Brown 1991), *The Convict and the Colonel* (Price 1998), to name but a few examples, indicate the paradigmatic status that the idiosyncratic biographical gaze has acquired in regional ethnography.

Here, neither classic cultural nor social approaches to character or personhood provide a fully effective model. In the Caribbean everyday worlds explored in this article character appears as a personal trajectory, an exemplary adventurous journey of personal coordination and *bildung* (Wardle 1999, Olwig 2017). At the same time, character is also an ontological quantum in an individual which demands ‘respect’ depending on how that individual puts their potentially dangerous ‘gifts’ to use in a turbid social milieu (Sobo 1993, Paton and Forde 2012, Wardle 2016, n.d.). With this in mind, it is telling that one reviewer of Wilson’s life study, *Oscar*, describes Wilson’s analytical approach as ‘awkwardly caught between being a humanistic biography of one madman, and the scientific study of a Caribbean society’ (Fisher 1976:912). In hindsight we can say that the awkwardness lies between theoretical expectations about the status of cultural character or social personhood as structural elements of a society in mid-Twentieth Century anthropology versus the momentous, though fundamentally contradictory, significance that individual character has in Caribbean social life itself. Indeed, ‘character’ comes to the fore on a ground of contradiction, categorical ambiguity and lack of consistency of larger world order that is eloquently summed up by Charles Carnegie when he describes how:

In the Caribbean considerations of propriety and protocol are cherished and upheld, as are disturbance and dislocation. Rigid distinctions are drawn and maintained on the basis of class, color and the like; yet contingent and contextual factors guide their application. People take comfort in the acquisition of private property and other accoutrements of the sedentary life but are equally enchanted by mobility. Decorum and quiet Sundays are held sacrosanct even while a cultural politics of noise has been elaborately cultivated... Caribbean life is full of contrapuntal

surprises to which the creative tension produced by inextricably conjoined elements routinely give rise (Carnegie 2002:66-67).

So, while expressions of character may be necessary and even inescapable in this context they may also be necessarily polythetic: character responds to a 'schizoid' and 'chaotic' world ordering (Wilson 1974, Benitez Rojo 1998), one where individuals can and do reference and code-switch between multiple forms of personal 'inheritance' or genetic cause; see for example Besson's analysis of the 'Afro-Scots McGhie Clan' (2016:276-301). Moments of order revert toward schism or duality without achieving definitive principles of authorization or legitimacy (Wardle 2002). Building individual character from multiple sources has, strategically, been a matter of multiplying escape routes (Comitas 1973) and maintaining ambiguity (Khan 1993).

To point to the heightened individualism of character in Caribbean social life is also to index this region's profoundly 'modern' historical construction—a social arena built on mass slavery *and* on resistance to slavery (James 1938, Mintz 1971). As Robotham puts it, West Indians have 'contest[ed] modernity on the terrain of modernity' (in Wardle 2000:128). And as we will see, the ambiguate, tricky or ludic interspace between the poles of public 'character'—the activity space of what Wilson famously called 'crab antics' (1973, Wardle 2007)—thus offers the formative ground against or within which individualistic character foregrounds itself as its own irreducible and unprecedented necessity in the Caribbean everyday.

## **What does it mean to witness ‘character’ in a Caribbean world? An example from Kingston, Jamaica?<sup>ii</sup>**

Moussu is standing behind the bar of the rum shop arguing with a stocky man about the female condom. Moussu is a small chubby light-skinned woman with long black plaits. There are ten rum drinkers round the bar including two women. ‘Me no believe in female condom; that cannot work’, insists the man. ‘But how you mean you don’t believe in female condom?! Female condom is more safe than the male one’, she retorts incredulously.

Moussu moves round the bar enlisting support for her argument from individual drinkers, but finally she has had enough and she slams her open hand hard on the bar – ‘bam, bam, bam’. ‘Listen here!’, she shouts: and she begins to expatiate on the use of the female condom. ‘It have a ring inside and you pull it out and put it on the man’ wood’. She demonstrates with an imaginary female condom. ‘It are safer than the male condom, but you must wash it out’. As she talks, she bats back various lewd comments, but most of the drinkers are awed by Moussu’s eloquent flow and nod approvingly. ‘You know say’, she declares; ‘you have three size of condom - small, large and medium - and most men don’t know them size; and it cause problem because if you use the wrong size it can pain you’. Now she mimics a man in pain, grimacing because he is wearing the wrong size of condom. ‘You now’, she says pointing to her stocky adversary: ‘you now most likely are "medium" and all the while you think you were "small"’. Everybody is laughing, but by now Moussu is triumphantly listing the best known venereal diseases - gonorrhea, syphilis, HIV. ‘And if you catch into that you dead’ comments my

neighbour. 'You know what' shouts Moussu above the noise, 'Sometimes me think me are in the wrong job... if me did set my mind to it me could...'.

Then she changes tack. 'Everybody want to leave Jamaica, everybody want to see someplace else, but me no want to leave Jamaica: me want to stay right here' and she points to her feet. 'People should be proud of this place; they should be proud of Jamaica. The problem is we don't have discipline. Look! The Chineese people have discipline. The English have discipline (pointing to me). All ten Chineese people live in one apartment and they share them food, eat out of one pot: all ten soap up one time. But we black Jamaican; you couldn't put ten of we in one house, we must quarrel!

This causes great delight, everyone is ecstatic, celebrating and feasting on this image of black Jamaican dissensus. 'Like crab in a barrel!' shouts a policeman feared in the locality for his violent instability. 'Crab in a barrel - one of them push out him hand and the rest try to draw him back'. His face is lit up with elation. 'Yes, man!' Moussu tells a story about going to visit a rich Indian family (part of her own family come from India 'me no know which part') she dressed herself and her children in Indian clothes: 'the people hug me, but the only thing was me can't dance fi them style'. But by now the conversation has swayed and fragmented - everyone is talking to everyone else excitedly, noone hears the last part of Moussu's discourse.

What, then, did we witness as readers or as participants when we distinctively sensed and recognised Moussu's character as crucial in the

creation of this situation? Certainly, not just an assemblage of generic cultural traits, not a composite of ‘duties’ and ‘rights’, nor the metonym of a given social or cultural world.<sup>iii</sup> There is the unique ‘human volume’ that is Moussu (Piette 2015), and there is also the distinctiveness of her ‘world-making’ practices (Goodman 1975, Overing 1990): these take the form of her special style of ‘reasoning’ to use the Jamaican term, that is, her way of generating and deploying principles, and her projection of these in an open-ended manner as judgements on everyone present and how they should understand the world. Thus, not normatively or typically, but contingently and uniquely, Moussu reshapes this given moment—converting experience into ‘an experience’ (as Dewey puts it, 1934) for all involved. These are all things that we perceive and give imaginative organisation to in witnessing her character.

No doubt, Moussu is also dramatizing and ‘making a scene’ in a Turnerian or Goffmanian sense: understood that way, this drama is also about (it represents) Moussu invoking a *dramatis persona* with which she teaches the men in the bar a lesson. There are pan-Caribbean dimensions to this. A reviewer of this article pointed helpfully to Jorge Mañach’s description of a Cuban style of humour, *choteo*—‘Choteo is a desire for independence that is externalized in a mockery of every non-imperative form of authority’ (in Pérez Firmat 1984:69). Street life as a ‘show’ and a ‘school’ are both often indexed by Jamaicans and undoubtedly, Moussu is schooling or, as some Caribbean people say, ‘charactering’<sup>iv</sup> her observers in a certain style of moral autonomy and resistance to ‘non-imperative... authority’ in this instance.<sup>v</sup>

However, there is a circularity to these ways of stating things—a reduction back to the cultural form—which still does not do justice to the distinctive necessity of Moussu’s (as opposed to some other person’s)



character showing itself in these contingent events. To acknowledge individual character is also to acknowledge both that ‘when two people do the same thing it is not the same thing’ (Rapport 1994). We might also note that Moussu’s character appears in this scene at the moment she slams her hand on the bar and marks her ‘turn’ in the exchange relation, which is true from the point of view of dramaturgy and semiotic structure but similarly incomplete and unsatisfactory—because we already know and expect something from Moussu before then. Ultimately, the scene is only possible—these momentary relations are only generated at all—because of the irreducibility and irreplaceability of Moussu. And, fieldwork is made up of incalculable sequences of this kind. I labour this point not only because it hits at the fundamental problem with individual character for cultural or social anthropologists raised initially, but also because these are crucial aspects of the reception of character in this kind of cultural world as Peter Wilson showed early on.

### **Crab antics and the momentousness of character in Caribbean cultural process**

Crab Antics (1973) has become part of the masonry of any attempt to build an ethnographic view of Anglophone Caribbean life. In his book Wilson argues for a characterial understanding of West Indian culture-making. Character as a ‘frame of mind’ and a ‘crystallization of values’ is crucial to people’s sense of who they are (1973:226). Yet character-formation in the West Indies, in the way it is assembled, by an individual and by their audience, is dualistic and indeed ‘schizoid’ (1974). People act (and are judged) in two ways taking into account the structuring forces of West Indian life, either of which can command ‘respect’. One model is egalitarian—people are valued for their special

qualities and capacities; somebody is a good guitar player, a fabulous drinker of rum or an outstanding virago. To be a character in this way is to have a 'reputation' for these specialist individual capacities. The other mode focuses on emulating the colonial order of virtues: the model of 'good character' presented in the 'respectable' behaviour of the ruling class. Acquiring 'respectability' involves conforming to the guiding symbols and habits attached to hierarchy; attendance at an established church, politeness and respect for the law.

Recognising someone's 'reputation' centres on an immediate appreciation and enjoyment of that person's talent in their domain of activity—a kind of *jouissance* or pleasurable expectancy captured in nicknames that give a schema for the story and fame of that individual—'Smokey', 'Brick Dust', 'Stagolee', 'Salt and Pepper', 'Dum-Dum', 'Catman' (Manning 1974, Lieber 1981). We will encounter 'Banjo-man' shortly. In contrast, 'respectability' is centred on betterment in the future: in religious terms it signals personal salvation, in this life it is guided by the idea of incremental economic improvement. As opposed to that offered to a person of 'reputation', the 'respect' granted to a 'respectable' character is grounded in values of gradual self-motivated striving. Respectability configures around conformity to, and mobility up, the social hierarchy as symbolically understood. The difficulty with 'respectable' behaviour is that it always tends to be perceived as imitative and inauthentic, as not coming from the will or 'heart' of the person who claims it, and hence as not true 'character' at all. Of course the trouble with 'reputation' symmetrically is that it is too authentic in the sense that it values autonomous character higher than adherence to the respectable framework of authority.

How does this generalized duality of character correspond to the instantiated character of a real person? Actual people's lives and their distinct characters for themselves and for others do not present themselves at these cultural poles—instead they leave fuzzy trails and ghostly resonances as they appear in time-space; in street-side talk or phone conversation, for example. No-one is or could be a perfect example of either of Wilson's types, most obviously because each pole holds within itself the seeds of its own incoherence, as we have seen. Understood as a system the duality is ultimately what Bateson calls a 'double-bind' (1956)—a no-win formulation—from which the individual can only escape by continuous self-refashioning and horizon-crossing.

Three critical interventions on Wilson's heuristic can be mentioned here. Wilson associated 'reputation' with maleness, male cultural characteristics, 'respectability' was seen as female oriented. However, Besson notes that women, as much as men, can and have striven toward gaining a characterial 'reputation' (1993). Freeman has indicated how, with the ending of British colonial value-system, the focus of 'respectability' shifted toward North America, while 'respectable' values came to look increasingly like Middle Class American values, though these have proved equally prone to reputational subversion and 'crab antics' (2014). In other words, the contours and cultural content have changed, but the polarity has not. Along somewhat distinct lines, Crichlow argues that in any given life pathway there is, in truth, a compromise between egalitarian and hierarchical values of the kind Wilson polarizes. She gives a metaphor for this—'making the sign of the cross'; a cross is signed by combining a horizontal (egalitarian) and a vertical (hierarchical) mark in a single continuous gesture. As has been widely remarked the cross(roads) is a notably multivalent symbol in Caribbean life (Wardle 2017:79-80). As such, Wilson's duality takes on

life as a part of a tactical toolbox for ‘homing freedoms’ that includes ‘limboing struggles for place’, ‘secreting respectability’ when the situation demands (Crichlow 2009, Wardle 2017:75-77).

These are useful complications of a formula which, however simple at first sight, has decidedly complex ramifications. Because the truth is that Wilson’s discussion leaves us with an idea of cultural character that is deeply underdetermined—any characterizing gesture can be read as signaling and adhering to hierarchical or to egalitarian values—or something in between.

### **Character’s context—the ‘noisy’ art of ‘talkover’**

Karl Reisman, a contemporary of Wilson’s, shows how individual character in the Caribbean—in certain public spaces, particularly the rum shop, but also the common space of the street and the family ‘yard’—is substantiated *in situ* through ‘contrapuntality’ and by ‘making a noise’ (Reisman 1975). He prefaces his comments by noting that speech in public situations often shows a very low emphasis on the ritualization of the other’s arrival in the scene by those already present. Entering the shared space the newcomer may not be greeted, welcomed, or otherwise ‘allowed in’ at all, for example by a pause in speech or deictic referencing. That kind of polite welcome might indicate prior restraint. Instead, the entrant begins to ‘make a noise’, that is, starts to ‘talk’ their own character over the rhythm of the situation-in-process. So, equally the stress is less on taking turns, since these situations are not coded as give-and-take exchanges; rather there is understood to be a total sound and ‘scene’ to which the individual is bringing their stylistic part (Lieber 1981:60-68). While acknowledging individual differences of tone, voices begin to talk over each other forming ‘contrapuntal’ layers

of shared sound within which there can be found, in the classic sense of contrapuntality, interdependence of harmony, but independence of rhythm and pitch. An inevitable noisy crescendo is reached, then unmarked break down and recommencement.

Reisman has been criticised for underemphasising reciprocal cuing procedures that are clearly available in even the most noisy of Caribbean conversations (Sidnell 2001). Linguistic critique, though, can be skewed by transliteration where spacing and punctuation offer visual proxies for rules-of-communication that enable the reader to discard 'noise' from the context-of-situation that was Reisman's focus. Taking into account the note of caution, then, support for what Reisman describes is very varied. I have recorded numerous events that are 'noisy' à la Reisman: Carnegie notes the widespread iteration of the contrapuntal polyrhythmic social situation, for example amongst bus drivers, passengers and 'ductors (n.d.). Not least, evidence for the intentional power of contrapuntal noise comes from a ubiquitous institutionalised Caribbean musical form, the 'talkover' made famous by Jamaican dub artists (Habekost 1993:55). Here the character of the performer appears as a disquisitive voice: spiritually powerful words are layered over an already established reiteration of mixed and harmonized sound-rhythms. In its simplest of forms, 'talkover' can consist of a youth 'rapping' to no particular audience as they saunter down a noisy street (e.g. Wardle 2000:83).

So, what do we learn about the ontology and aesthetics of character from Reisman's account? Character here appears, foregrounds itself in public, as speech pitched in counterpoint to and over the sonic *mise-en-scène* of mixed tones and repeated sounds—background music, the clunk and whizz of betting machines, car engine horns or what have you. That there is a type of tuning and harmonization of group attention

needed for demonstrating individual character in this way is something I have argued before through analysis of activity at Jamaican 'nine nights' or wakes. Nine nights are 'noisy' and anarchic events that celebrate the death (and continuing spiritual presence) of a particular individual through song, dance and play. As a communal event that is also a venue for showing individual character, the meaning of the nine night is well summed up by Bakhtin when he states that aesthetic experience does not involve 'participation in one unitary consciousness... On the contrary, it consists in the intensification of one's own outsideness with regard to others, one's own unique position outside other human beings' (in Wardle 2000:188).

The episode transcribed here comes from a longer description of activities in the early hours of a wake or 'nine night': 'speech' must perforce be reframed as 'speeches' with the overall noisy background tuned out in order to arrive at the characterial features in play. Nine nights involve a noisy spilling of people from the street and neighbourhood into the yard and house of the family of the deceased, and a temporary turning of those more enclosed spaces into public arenas. Here, one of these visitors, Banjo-Man, makes a special claim on behalf of musicians as part of a nine-night ceremony, thereby substantiating the special importance of his distinct presence and reputation at this specific event. Amidst the show of his own reputation there is also, as Crichtlow would put it a tactics of 'secreting respectability' on his own behalf (see above). The Revival Priestess encourages this show of character and virtù stressing how it comes from Banjo-Man's 'heart', 'thought' and from 'praise of God'. Having attended many nine nights I can say that there is no ceremonial necessity for musicians at these events as such since anyone can provide musical accompaniment. Contrarily, the true principle Banjo-Man is calling

attention to with regard to 'the musician' is the imperative that individual character and gifts should make themselves known:

BANJO-MAN: Order, hold on, a point of order—a next psalm is coming up here too you know, gentlemen; a hundred and fifty psalms...

PRIESTESS: Another psalm?

BANJO-MAN: Yes, one more.

PRIESTESS: Before the prayer?

BANJO-MAN: Yes mmm... for the musician mmm... for the musician, a hundred and fifty psalms... ('ah, look at this one too' *pleads Tarzan*).

BANJO-MAN: Praise him with the timbrel and the dance. Praise him with...('authority' *suggests Lee*)..., praise him with string instrument and organs, praise him upon the loud cymbals, praise him upon high sounding cymbal. Let everything that have breath praise the Lord (*various cries of* "Praise ye the Lord!")...

ALL: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost world without end, amen...

BANJO-MAN: Now beg pardon brother and sister; him say praise Him upon cymbal, praise him also upon the harp, praise him on the instrument of string—praise him in the singing and in the DANCE! (*shouts of* "must dance!")

[...]

PRIESTESS: (*approvingly*) G'along!... Your strings of music here is coming from your heart, is coming from your thought and it will be, and it is praise by God—me don't care what me nor you, nor that man want to say—it's coming from praise of God. Me know when me a girl pickney at st. Mary... [I know that when I was a child at St Mary...]

With Banjo-Man we have the puzzle of a character who appears in a scene contingently yet lays claim both to necessity and distinctiveness. Let us remove Banjo-Man imaginatively from the event; we still have a 'nine night' but we do not have a nine night with 'the musician', who is again not any musician but Banjo-Man himself. These paradoxical qualities of 'character' remind us not only of the momentousness of character in making actual a certain kind of potential society; they also raise questions about where character definitively comes from in a historical setting where no-one can lay simple claim any kind of autochthony—what is the original and legitimating factor which enables the assertion of character?

The question of multiple cognatic origins for character iterates variously in everyday Caribbean culture. Everyday claims about the precedence, or the a priority (see below), of personal character may not always be highly dramatized, but where a person's gifts, hence the basis of their character, come from remains an open debate. Contrarily, what individuals do with their gifts is a matter of their own imagination and willing; good gifts can be used for bad ends, bad for good, ambivalent gifts for either good or bad work etc. Characters are in fact sites of



battling psychic forces and varied powers (Wardle 2016, 2018). This assertoric presentation of character in the cultural scene raises the question of its origins and its process of germination. Here, Georg Simmel offers a theoretical counterpoint.

### **Simmel on the ‘unsocial’ individual and the ‘a priority’ of its character**

For Georg Simmel in his essay ‘How is Society Possible’ (1910), ‘Society’ is first and finally a formative expectation in the imaginative life of an individual human being who seeks a place for themselves in ‘it’. ‘Society’ presents itself doubly to this individual; intuitively as an overwhelming totality to be made sense of, intellectually as something to be actively configured. So, if we wish to comprehend this ‘Society’ we are tied to an inquiry about the life and consciousness of an individual who is always in the middle of their experience of ‘It’, who is always categorizing and substantiating their own social character for themselves and for others; who is, as Simmel puts it, ‘vocationally’ incomplete. And this, of course, includes the student of society who is always also learning what ‘Society’ means by actively typologizing and generalizing—casting intentions and expectations into, and deriving relations and concepts from, dense scenes of activity.

In Simmel’s description, the character of the singular life makes its appearance for us as a *type* of social activity that resists assimilation to our typology. This particular life foregrounded itself because of our autobiographical practices of differentiation—our personal constructions of social possibility and of the relation between social kinds. By complexifying our schemas for ‘Society’ we arrived at an increasingly

‘precisely founded relationship’ to this specific individual. Their character still actively resists our viewpoint, though, appearing in friction with this societal template of ours (1910:381).

For Simmel—here he follows Kant closely—‘Society’ is not, then, some empirical thing, it is rather a ‘definite sort of cognition’, an *a priori*, that ‘can never inhere in things, since it is only brought into existence by the mind’ (1910:373). Nonetheless, the self perceives its own activity and futurity as radically bound up in the form and meaning of this ‘Society’ *within* which its own activity takes shape and *where* its own life acquires intentionality. ‘Society’ from this perspective is not something already given, but rather an as yet unfulfilled vocational *potentiality* of and for the self. From the subject’s viewpoint ‘it is not a matter [in this case] of what nature makes of the human being, but of what the human being makes of [itself]’ (Kant 2006:192).

In figuring someone else’s character we try to ‘cogniz[e] the interior of [their] human being from the exterior’ (Kant 2006:183). However, in doing so we are aware of something inaccessible—the free imaginative ground, the generative *innenwelt* or motivity<sup>vi</sup> of that person—which cannot be accessed by our exterior gaze (Piette 2015, Rapport 2015, Wardle 2015). Only an empathetic reassembling of this interior structure of their viewpoint as a ‘foreign’ dimension of our own helps us at this point toward restructuring ours (Stein [1917]1989). Either way, we find that this ‘in-additive’ quality of the other’s individuality cannot be reduced to any objective type, but their character is not present ontologically without it (Simmel 1910:382).

A telling instance of Simmel’s social *a priori* at work takes us back into the Caribbean world: in the Guyanas of the Seventeenth Century both

Amerindian and African slave women routinely used an abortifacient, *flos pavonis*, ‘so that their children will not become slaves like they are’; or so they told Hessian naturalist Maria Merian<sup>vii</sup> in the 1690s. Black slaves also ‘sometimes take their own lives because ... they believe they will be born again, free and living in their own land’ Merian notes (translation from the latin in Schiebinger 2004:1). Similar ideas were widespread amongst slaves all across the Caribbean throughout the period of slavery. For these slaves there was no imaginable vocation for living in and changing the given order of things. Slavery, which was the defining political-economic form from the earliest stages of the Caribbean’s neoteric construction was by definition never grounded in epistemic expectations for a common society: evidently for some the concrete and given impossibility of social life outweighed its imaginable future as a place for the self. Nonetheless, individual character was recognised from the beginning in the Caribbean as evidence both of a search for a place in a possible society and as a measure of a person’s subjective autonomy.

This again returns us to the tension and contradiction Simmel exposes between social character as an inward vocation and as an outward presentation. Another’s character can, of course, exist quite independently of a given type of embodiment; it can be mediated multiply and have diverse kinds of ontological continuity and real presence. In the following narrative the highly defined and irreducible character of Miss West appears to Jeanette in the form of a voice and an empty chair. In life, relations of Miss West and her adoptive daughter, Jeanette, had been emotionally volatile (cf. Wardle 2000). After Miss West’s death, Jeanette had experienced various interventions by Miss West, as she describes here, when Jeanette and a friend, Sonny, were repainting the house Miss West’s formerly lived in:

Like when Aunt Erica dead. And [we were] painting up the house. Definitely, me and Sonny are painting and as me climb up on the chair and start up to paint me hear a voice say 'I am not like that colour paint there, you know'. And me say 'wha you say a while ago, Sonny?' And by the time me go up on the chair again me hear it again; and me have some water and me just throw the water on the chair and tell her 'get up' and tell her 'fi you time done' – now she dead, you understand? Because she too bright [cocky] telling you fi... So, if you don't put the place in the colour she like she will take set (take offence). Yes, so you don't give her what she wants and make sure [make it clear that] she dead; she who?! [who does she think she is] – throw the water and tell her your time done now! She fi get up and come out.

For all Jeanette's claims that Miss West must 'leave' and that her time is 'done', there is a reminder here that knowledge of 'Society' is not limited to knowledge of embodied human beings; similarly, that there can be powerful encounters with unique 'character' in virtual or avatarial form. As Simmel argues, both society and character exist *a priori* as forms of sense perception, cognition and willful intention; character persists protentively beyond the intuitive-sensory cues that initiated our recognition of it. The contents and correlations of society, nature and character that result are, of course, open to radical historico-situational and philosophical variation.

### **Concluding remarks: character beyond cultural systematicity**

'Character' has a long history in European thought, signalled by the fact that the same word, used to mean a mark imprinted on a person's soul, is

found in almost every European language. It is this deeply embedded image that philosopher John Locke criticizes when he notes how ‘It is an established opinion among some men, that there are... characters, as it were, stamped upon the mind of man, which the soul receives in its very first being and brings into the world with it’. He proceeds to show the ‘falseness of this supposition’ ([1690]1983:5): Kant responds in his *Anthropology* by defining character as the art or architectonic of building maxims for life in the world out of *a priori* potentials of the mind ([1795]2006): Freud reenvisioned these *a priori* capacities of character not as the rational ground for free action but as, to varying degrees, pathological and compulsive ([1916]1963). Durkheim, and perhaps a mainstream of Twentieth Century social anthropologists, came to understand the *a priori* as an observable social structure that gives personality-personhood its prefigured moral organisation (Laidlaw 2002). Simmel reverses Durkheim; ‘Society’ is state of mind, a regulative idea that gives objective coherence to the phenomenal array. He indicates another problem and its partial solution; the self formulates ‘Society’ so that it can find a characterial vocation for itself in ‘It’. Encountering character is inevitable yet contradictory: little wonder the individuality of the other’s character cannot fit without friction (and empathy) into my construction.

Regardless of these much longer histories of intellectual debate anthropologists may be intuitively wary of ‘character’ as perhaps theoretically passé in a way that ‘subjectivity’, for example, is not. Contrarily, in other disciplines, for example in studies of literature (see Adam Reed’s discussion in this Special Issue), the ‘ontology of fictional characters’ remains very much a live discussion (e.g. Eco 2009). This article has offered an ethnographic perspective: in the Caribbean everyday ‘character’ is, again, a living concept in a way that

anthropological terms such as ‘intersubjectivity’ or ‘relational personhood’ will never be. If ‘character’ appears in public as the style by which someone fashions a place for themselves in a society of their own making, then it is also understood in terms of the gifts that the person ‘brings into the world’ and how they freely put these to use. So, character is at the same time a matter of spirit, politics and aesthetics in a ‘schizoid’ culture—as the art of ‘talkover’ demonstrates. ‘Talkover’ is in turn demanded because there is no finally accepted regime of truth, rather a multiplication of polyrhythmic attempts at making society and establishing human truths.

A critique of the uni-directional relationship between culture and character has long existed in Anthropology. Early in his book *Culture and Personality*, Anthony Wallace asks the question ‘is it necessary that all participants in a stable socio-cultural system have the same “map” of the cultural system in order that they may select the correct overt behaviours under the various relevant circumstances?’ (1964: 31). After a brief excursus into the possible combinations of behaviour and cognition that would have to be ‘shared’ if this were so (these could run into millions in even simple social activities), Wallace answers his own question—no. For one thing, individuals in interaction can quite quickly ‘produce a socio-cultural system which is beyond their own comprehension’, hence beyond sharing. ‘Evidently cognitive sharing is not necessary for stable social interaction’ (1964:37-38). Better, then, to look at people’s attempts at ‘complementarity’ via an ‘articulation of [their] uniquely private cognitive worlds’ than to take their systemic ‘conformity’ to a shared cultural map as given (Wallace 1964:39).

Wallace’s suggestion that human interaction can rapidly create a cultural system beyond the comprehension of its interactants is

particularly accurate and apropos when applied to the historically unstable situation of the Caribbean. Might Wilson's duality of Respectability and Reputation be taken to indicate an objectively unified and coherent cultural system? Certainly not. The wider historical cultural pattern has been chaotic and fractal (Baker 1998, Benitez Rojo 1998). Concern with the problem of individual 'character' entered West Indian culture-making as part of the violent fissive dynamic of modern colonialism. However, conceiving of character in terms of moral polarity suggests a desire for orientation hence transcendence; a subjective symbolic compass that allows the self to place its characterial self-presentation vis-à-vis the chaotic wider scene.

Simmel's account of the 'a priority' of 'Society' as an unconditioned conditioner at the centre of human imaginative experience offers useful hints, then, for comprehending how 'character' becomes foregrounded—likewise in resolving the problem Evans-Pritchard or Turner describe where human beings reenter social description as 'automaton[s]' or as 'wax to be imprinted with "cultural patterns"'. 'Character' *is* what it is in that moment, but it also asserts a certain kind of possible social arrangement where there *will be* a crucial place for that self's characteristic capacities. Thus, character is the performance and generalization of a possible society to an appreciative audience and it is also a real quantum or mark of the person who invokes it. Character belongs partly to the past as a priority, partly to the future as utopian protension, also partly to the self who imagines and partly to the other who witnesses and recognises. As Moussu says ending her peroration—'Sometimes me think me are in the wrong job... *if me did set my mind to it me could...*'. Or as the Priestess insists to Banjo-Man; '[y]our strings of music here is coming from your heart, is coming from your thought'. In each case the necessity of *this* character is instantiated by invoking the

self as an unconditioned condition for society projected into the future. Thought of this way individual character *is* a kind of society coming into being—a world in the process of being made.

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<sup>i</sup> As a reviewer of this article points out, Stocking has noted at least one dimension of this difference (e.g. Stocking 1986:8). Complex typologies of 'racial character' played a key role in the establishment of American colonial control in the Caribbean (in Panama, Haiti and elsewhere in the region). Both race and class consciousness played comparably complicated part in British rule regionally (e.g. Wardle 2017).

<sup>ii</sup> This clip from fieldnotes was first published in Wardle 2012: 512.

<sup>iii</sup> Scornful reference to someone as 'a sample' in Dominica gives a contrasting indication of how reduction to generic qualities can be deployed to depreciate individuality of character (Adom Philogene Heron, personal communication).

<sup>iv</sup> I am grateful to Pablo Herrera for pointing me to how 'character' is used in this verbal form in Cuba.

<sup>v</sup> Mañach's description is important, apart from anything else, because it raises the question what kinds of 'authority' (or potentia) *are* 'imperative' in this setting (cf. Wardle forthcoming )

<sup>vi</sup> In using 'motivity' I am influenced by Locke's sense—the imaginative impulse towards action and by Rosenbaum and Troccoli's reappropriation of the term to describe inchoate social urges as these coalesce with and against (or indifferent to) acknowledged forms of Caribbean social structure (Rosenbaum and Troccoli 2017)

<sup>vii</sup> For an epistemological reassessment of Merian's work in Surinam see Strathern 2018.